AQA

A-level
GENERAL STUDIES
(SPECIFICATION B)

Unit 4   Change

Insert

Stimulus Material

These texts are to be read in conjunction with the questions in GENB4.

The questions arise from the texts, but they should **not** be answered by reference to the texts alone.

GENB4

Text A

Thinking Positively

There has been too much focus on treating mental illness rather than on promoting mental health. So say the advocates of what has (since 1998) been called Positive Psychology, which lays emphasis on happiness, pride, mindfulness, and forgiveness. Hundreds of articles have been published on the subject in journals of psychology, and its lessons have been applied in schools, in business, and even in the US Army as the basis for its Comprehensive Soldier Fitness Program.

Critics wonder, though, whether the passage of Positive Psychology from academic journal to practical application and from there to popular culture might have been too rapid: could it be that the uses to which the theory has been put have out-run the science? Is it really the case that if we think positively – if we are optimistic enough – we can cultivate 'happiness' in the present and, perhaps, inoculate ourselves against future hardship, and even illness?

One of these critics is James Coyne of the University of Pennsylvania. He is sceptical about the power of Positive Psychology to protect us against illness, to enable us to make better business decisions, and to strengthen soldiers' resilience on the battlefield. He is scornful of the 'wellness' gurus employed by companies like IBM, FedEx and Adobe to teach positive-thinking skills, and of schools that have put positive psychology on the curriculum. He is particularly dubious about claims made in books with catchy titles like 'The How of Happiness'.

Of course, common sense and experience tell us that negative thoughts are likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, and that when we smile we are more likely to 'make friends and influence people' than when we are a picture of gloom. As Professor of Psychology Julie Norem points out, however, thinking positively may not help everyone – and it will certainly not help all of us all the time. Negative thoughts may actually be an effective defensive strategy. She has studied individuals presented with problems in mathematics, word puzzles and with challenges like playing darts: those subjects who think through negative possibilities and who devise strategies to avoid them, may perform more effectively than subjects who approach tasks with blithe optimism. An attempt to jolly such 'defensive pessimists' into thinking positively may actually be inhibiting. Norem worries that Positive Psychology takes too little account of individual differences in its zeal to spread the gospel, and that it may give the public the impression that 'one size fits all'.

Worse, it may delude people (therapists, health-professionals, and patients alike) into believing that we can think ourselves to good health – that cancer patients, for example, by being optimistic and 'mindful' might defeat their cancer (after what the media often call a 'fight'). "Particularly for cancer," says Coyne, "there's a strong biological component that isn't moveable in that way." Certainly, there should be no question of our blaming the depressive, or the cancer-ridden, or the otherwise ill for failing to 'look on the bright side'. Nor should we blame Positive Psychology researchers for what the popular media do with their research. There are those who work in the field who wish that it had never acquired capital letters – that positive psychology, with small letters, will have done its job if all psychologists and all health-professionals are made aware of the extent to which our emotional and physical states are interdependent.

Text A continued

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Source: data from Gallup – Healthways Well Being Index 2013

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Text B

Heritage Open Days

Heritage Open Days celebrate England's fantastic architecture and culture by offering access to places that are usually closed to the public or normally charge for admission. Every year on four days in September buildings of every age, style, and function throw open their doors. It is a once-a-year chance to discover architectural treasures and enjoy a wide range of tours, events, and activities that bring local history and culture to life.

After a first pilot in Gosport proved a success, the now defunct Civic Trust established 'Heritage Open Days' in 1994 as England's contribution to the European Heritage Days. Starting out with some 700 sites, 'Heritage Open Days' has since developed into Britain's largest and most popular grass-roots heritage event, with participation more than doubling during the first decade of the millennium.

Free of charge and right on people's doorstep, 'Heritage Open Days' is an event for everyone, whatever their background, age and ability. From castles to city halls, tunnels to tower tops, police cells to private homes, workshops to woodland walks, the variety of places and ways to discover them are endless.

'Heritage Open Days' is organised by a huge network of people who share a passion for places, history and culture. Locally, over 1400 organisations and some 40 000 volunteers organise thousands of site openings and events, jointly attracting over one million visitors. They make 'Heritage Open Days' England's biggest voluntary event.

'Heritage Open Days' celebrates what makes local communities and neighbourhoods special. By stimulating curiosity and discovery, the event connects people with their locality and helps foster a sense of belonging and pride.

Text C

Banning ideas at the borders

> An internet campaign in November 2014 sought to have a ban placed on the so-called 'pick-up' artist Julien Blanc from entering Britain. Blanc was infamous for his advice on how to seduce a woman, if necessary by violent means.

Just because the Home Secretary has the power to ban someone doesn't mean she should use it or that she should even be asked. It is one thing for those who take righteous issue with Blanc's demonstrable misogyny and racism to apply commercial pressure; but to press the Home Secretary to use discretionary powers is a different matter, and should be subject to two distinct sets of considerations.

The first is rooted in principle, namely the trade-off between liberty and security, in which so-called security has too often prevailed in recent years. It may be more complex than clicking on a petition, but those demanding that Blanc be banned ought to ask: has a crime been committed? If it has, then the campaign should focus on demanding that it be investigated. This would be a far worthier course of action, as it might see Blanc held to account for his actions.

The second set of considerations is practical, and it is here that the campaign feels especially wrong-headed. There's no need to point out that this is the age of the internet; this was, after all, the very medium of the petition. But there does appear to be a need to point out that, in the world that the web has shrunk and interconnected more closely than before, a ban is next to useless. Ideas do not have borders. You do not stop someone saying things and having them heard by not letting them visit somewhere – if anything, you make them into the cause célèbre they so transparently long to be. Bans turn ranting clerics you've never heard of into ones you suddenly never stop hearing about, and a ban could easily turn Blanc into a guy who doesn't even need to turn up to dispense his rancid ideology. He could simply hire a London venue and be beamed in from the States – and get twice the coverage on the back of it.

Come on over to Britain, mate, and let's see your act. That act would be engaged with by women and men, from bloggers to columnists to tweeters. Secret recordings of his 'guru' sessions would be made by enterprising citizen journalists, giving the public the right to decide precisely what sort of chap Blanc is. If he breaks the law, then let him be dealt with by it – not by a visa ban. Let Britain be a place where the rule of law is mightier than immigration control.

Source: The Guardian,15 November 2014

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Text D

Fiction and the Future

We are mistaken if we believe that it is the function of science fiction to predict the future; if it has a 'function' at all, it is to imagine futures that are, at least, possible. We should not have expected to be driving flying cars by now – but the idea that we might one day has not gone away. The spaceships propelled by light that Jules Verne wrote about in his 1865 novel 'From the Earth to the Moon' have still not arrived; but solar sails are on the computer screens of engineers around the world.

Big American technology companies have run conferences in which science-fiction writers have been invited to float their ideas. Apple, Google and Microsoft know full well that what seems outlandish now might be taken for granted in a generation.

At the beginning of the 20th century, science-fiction writers tended to be optimistic about the future: science was generally reckoned to be a force for good. After two world wars, and the invention of bombs capable of destroying the planet, the mood changed, and it took a super-hero to save the world from a 'mad scientist'. Today, preoccupied as we are by the possibility of cyber-warfare, over-population, and climate change, it may be especially difficult to write a convincing utopia, where science redeems a shattered world.

Science-fiction author Neal Stephenson believes it is time to think more positively about what we might achieve. He helped create the web-based Project Hieroglyph at Arizona State University as a 'space for writers, scientists, artists and engineers to collaborate on creative, ambitious visions of our near future.' One outcome of the project is a collection of short stories that look ahead with some optimism: 'Hieroglyph: Stories and Blueprints for a Better Future'. Of course, whether tomorrow's engineers will read such stories and be enthused by them to give practical effect to the authors' visions is something else. Science-fiction writers like Margaret Atwood, Ursula le Guin and William Gibson (the writer who coined the term 'cyberspace') do a lot of research to ensure that their fictions are credible, so it seems sensible for student-engineers to read 'serious' science fiction alongside the research-papers that are prescribed reading.

The rest of us, too, might be well-advised to arm ourselves against 'future shock' by being acquainted with possibilities conjured in the imaginations of our most thoughtful science-fiction writers. At least then, we should be able to say: 'They told us so.'

Text E

Learning to earning

For as long as there have been schools, the question 'what should they teach?' has been uppermost. When clerks and typists were needed, the emphasis was on reading, writing and arithmetic; when soldiers were needed, attention was paid to Physical Training (PT), or Physical Education (PE) as it became. With globalisation came new courses in Business Studies; and with the felt needs of the 'knowledge economy' in mind, ICT was added to the school curriculum.

The coalition government in 2010 commissioned Professor Alison Wolf to review the connections – and disconnections – between formal education and the labour market. Among the findings published in 2011 were the following:

> There is a substantial literature which examines whether and how often individuals are over-qualified for their jobs, in the sense of holding formal qualifications at a level higher than is required to carry them out. They are consistent in finding higher levels of over-education in this sense: typically between a quarter and a third of contemporary employees fall in this category. At national level, government research confirms that the number of individuals holding a given qualification at a given level is far higher than the number of jobs that require that level of certificate in every category except jobs requiring no formal qualification at all. Employer surveys also indicate that skill shortages are generally low on their list of issues and problems.
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> However, this general picture can be and is combined with shortages, sometimes acute, in specific areas. One important piece of evidence for this is the very different returns to different degree subjects. At present, quantitative degrees currently bring especially high returns in the English labour market (as does law), and have done for a good many years. This suggests a genuine shortage of quantitative, and especially mathematics, skills; something which is confirmed, at a more micro level, by employer surveys. Similarly, data analysis by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills indicates genuine skill shortages in a number of specific occupations and sectors.
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> Source: extract from Review of Vocational Education – The Wolf Report, March 2011

It is one thing to try to meet present national, economic and social needs by emphasising this subject or by adding that new one to the school curriculum; but how can we tell what skills and knowledge might be needed in a generation or two's time? Herbert Spencer's question 'What knowledge is of most worth?' posed in 1861, is one to which there never has been an easy answer.

END OF STIMULUS MATERIAL

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